
PATHWAYS TO PARTICIPATION

Reflections on PRA

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Reflections on PRA experience

I come to this having been a participant-observer of some of the evolution of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). I had the incredible privilege of being around when others were innovating in some of its early days. More recently, from a base in the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), I have been trying with others to keep up with developments and to support networking and good practice. This has been an amazing experience. I have to pinch myself to be sure it is for real and not some fantasy. Few people have been so lucky.

But...

I am tied in four knots. For me the PRA experience, if I can call it that, has been quite extraordinary and wonderful. I want to share that with others. I would like them to be able to choose to have similar experiences. But I have a deep horror of evangelism, and that makes me hold back. I have an ingrained male, middle-class English reticence about talking about feelings. But feelings of anxiety, thrill, fun, wonderment and fulfilment have been central in my PRA-related experience, and they keep on coming. I dislike hypocrisy (English art form though it may be). I think personal behaviour and attitudes are central to good PRA. But the more I talk about behaviour and attitudes, the more of a hypocrite I know myself to be. And you can't win this one, because repeated confessions of hypocrisy without changing behaviour compound themselves into a complacent habit. And last, I think it is terrifically important not to take oneself too seriously. But any writing about personal experience risks just that.

Notwithstanding these inhibitions

Two personal discoveries stand out for me. Both turn things on their heads. Both can be captured in slogans. The first is 'others can do it', meaning that

other people, especially those who are 'lowers' in a context, can usually do much more and much better than 'uppers' believe. The second is 'enjoy and learn', meaning that there is fulfilment, fun and learning to be found in experiences otherwise felt as threatening because what will happen is hard to predict or control.

Others can do it

Probably many of us have had mind-blowing experiences in PRA contexts. It has come as a revelation to me writing this, that most of mine have been discovering that other people could do things I did not believe they could: farmers in Ethiopia who understood a histogram; women in West Bengal who drew a seasonal labour diagram; a farmer in Tanzania who drew a map of agro-ecological zones; villagers in Karnataka who made a 3-D coloured model of their watershed on the ground; farmers in Gujarat who kept and updated their own map of underground aquifers.

Then there were people doing things 'the wrong way'. The first time I saw matrix scoring I only knew about ranking, and nearly intervened to say 'that's not the way to do it'. Sometimes my incompetence made space for other people's creativity. So it was with a group of women in Tanzania. My limited Swahili prevented my telling them fully how to matrix score out of 5 or 10, so they did it their own way, with free scoring. This was new to me and, as I came to understand, has its own special strengths. I began to learn not to give instructions in detail. At one time I would take half an hour to 'teach' matrix scoring, with lots of dos and don'ts. I came to realize that two to three minutes could be enough,¹ that there was no single right way, and that people could learn and invent for themselves.

Then there has been the wonderment when others have an experience that changes how they see things. A soil and water conservation officer in India, after a transect to observe farmers' own soil and water conservation measures, said it had been one of the most remarkable days of his life. And no one who was on the first PRA South-South in India will ever forget the late Saiti ('Ambassador') Makuku's immense and inspiring enthusiasm after a similar experience.

Then there has been slowly learning how changing one's behaviour can empower others to speak up and give feedback. In Iran, it was only after I had sat silent on the floor for a minute that someone told me that I had started off the workshop in a culturally insensitive way. Had I not sat silent, I might never have learnt that.

And the last part of this learning has been the revelation that others, especially those who in context are 'lowers' to me, can often, even usually, do things better than I can. This has been startling, sobering and humbling,

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but easily converted into delight at what they find and show they can do. Peers are better at facilitating peers: villagers, for example, can be much better facilitators of other villagers than I could ever be. Making space for others to take over one's roles brings its own fulfilment.

Enjoy and learn

What I want to say here is that more and more, in our turbulently changing world, we need new ways of learning and being. I hesitate over 'new', because little is new under the sun: but so much is changing so fast that we are driven to innovate and to discover things for ourselves, and to learn better how to learn. We seem to need some way of combining continuous creativity, innovation and adaptation. We do not have time always to search and see whether what we do is new or a rediscovery. And that is how it should be. That we are finding what works for us is enough.

Is it like white water canoeing?² Faced with rapids, you do not know what you are in for. You commit. The white water boils up around you. It is all unpredictable, risky, unstable, exhilarating. It demands intense alertness, instant adaptation and learning, learning, learning on the run. No one else can learn for you. There are ideas in books, but you can only really learn by doing, by messing up and trying again. And an early (and nearly late) lesson for me was that the moment you think you are through a rapid, the moment your attention wanders, that is when you tip up. The moment any of us thinks we have got it about participation, that we have somehow arrived, that we have learnt what we need to know – is that the moment we lose the plot? Is that the very moment when we tip up and go under?

Faced with chaotic uncertainties, it is natural to be tense, taut and uptight. But that does not work. Are the keys then a relaxed alertness, coming to love uncertainty and to embrace anxiety? As stimuli and opportunities for learning? I have always been nervous about uncontrollable public situations. PRA processes are unpredictable. So much of PRA is launching out and taking risks. Have any of us not known that pit-of-the-stomach butterflies feeling before a workshop, a training or part of a PRA process in the field? What will happen? Will it work out this time? Will I make a fool of myself? But trying to minimize anxiety through control, through routinization, can blunt, even brutalize the process. The paradox I have had to learn is that things work out better with less control. The challenge is to move towards being happy hosting the visceral butterflies, exulting in optimal unpreparedness, and revelling in the fun of flexibility and improvisation.

Then there is excitement. For me personally, and I know for many others, this PRA thing has been extraordinarily exciting. But how widely can this excitement be part of PRA for others in the future?

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In exploratory rock climbing, those who do a new route name it, record the first ascent and write up the details for a guidebook. Later climbers gain pleasure from repeating the routes, but they never have quite the same thrill of exploration. The quality of that first experience, of that uncertainty, that sense of achievement, can never be repeated. Can PRA be different? We have source books. Some of them are described as manuals. Most of them describe methods and how to facilitate them. Some of them lay down sequences. They all have their uses. But is the big challenge to see how the freshness, the exhilaration, the eternal novelty, the interactive creativity of PRA can be continuous discoveries and rediscoveries for practitioners? And if so, what should we as practitioners and trainers be doing now so that others are not denied the privileged experiences we have had?

Can excitement and exhilaration somehow be a permanent part of PRA? Can the thrill of exploration be generic, embedded in good practice, an assured and recurring feature? Every situation and every experience is new. So can PRA processes always, everywhere, have the potential to startle, amaze, excite, inspire? And to show that things one did not dream of can be done, by people one did not believe could do them?

With anything new, there is a danger of settling down. In other fields, an era of innovation passes and practice settles into ruts. Much PRA too has been routinized; and some things done in the name of PRA abuse poor people. But could bad practice be made simply a phase, a misfit in early adoption and an opportunity to learn? Could there be less and less PRA by rote in the future? Could it increasingly be different each time, more and more empowering lowers, more and more an exploration, a new experience, unique, creative and leading to unknowns which become personal discoveries, ever fresh?

Ways of living, being and learning?

Whether we call it PRA or something else (and long live pluralism and sharing without boundaries), are we groping for an evolving way of living? Is there a convergence here between traditions? Do we have in common a search for ways of being and learning which fit us better for a fulfilling life in a world of accelerating change? And if so, where should PRA go now? Is there more it can contribute?

Perhaps we should all seek our own answers on our own new pathways. Some may want to slough off the label, others to change what it stands for, yet others to describe what they do in some other way. We can celebrate and share our diversity. Above all, we should not get stuck. Anyone doing the same as two years ago has lost the plot. Something may be terribly wrong. There are sayings associated with PRA, like 'Don't rush', 'Embrace error',

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'Use your own best judgement at all times', 'Hand over the stick', and 'Ask them'. To these should we now add:

- 'Do something different'
- 'Learn'
- 'Change'
- 'Enjoy?'

Notes

¹I am not suggesting that this is always right. People complain that they need more instructions. Other trainer/facilitators take longer and get good results. Still, brief instructions fit the pattern that 'lowers' can discover and invent for themselves much more than 'uppers' normally suppose.

²See Peter Vaill, *Learning as a Way of Being: strategies for survival in a world of permanent white water*, (1996) Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. (The book costs, alas, £24.95 in the UK.)

CHAPTER 6

Rene D. Clemente

From participatory appraisal to participation in governance in the Philippines

My personal involvement with Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) began in mid-1993. I was working then for a national secretariat of a network promoting sustainable agriculture and appropriate technology in the Philippine countryside. Our co-ordinator and a colleague had just undergone PRA training and wanted to try giving a training course to see if it would 'click'. We knew other PRA practitioners and tapped them for the training. It went very well and we had such positive feedback that PRA became a part of our regular training. More and more I began to focus on giving PRA training. However, after working for seven years in that organization, I decided to move on. From 1994 to 1995, I was a freelance PRA trainer, but by early 1996 I had joined KAISAHAN, a Manila-based non-governmental organization (NGO), to help develop their programme on using PRA for local development planning.

In 1997, eight national NGOs formed an alliance to promote democratic participation in governance. We playfully called it the BATMAN (or the Barangay¹ Administrator's Trainings on Management) Consortium. It has a more formal name today – the Barangay-Bayan² Governance Consortium (BBGC) – but somehow, the 'BATMAN' nickname stuck. The BBGC has five main training modules, and PRA for local development planning is one of the most popularly requested. From the original eight NGOs, the network now has 40 members scattered all over the Philippine archipelago, helping to spread the approach.

This chapter is a reflection on three of the major challenges we face regarding PRA and local governance in the Philippines. I have organized a list of my reflections under three broad issues. First, not all practice makes perfect; I reflect on some of the less commonly acknowledged features of PRA exercises and their implications for how we understand people's participation. Second, I have some reflections to share on the need to check our attitudes and behaviour in facilitation. And third, I want to share some issues with regard to scaling up participatory planning approaches.